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Challenging Christopher's "Disability" to Communicate Properly in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

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The present paper is a critical review of Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Many reviewers have claimed that Christopher Bloom has a disability to decipher, to comprehend and to depict objects, actions and other phenomena due to his condition, since he has Asperger's syndrome. In opposition to this idea, a research of particular types of graphic representation used by the narrator reveals that he does not merely replace troublesome words, but masterly uses pictures to represent the truth. Theoretically speaking, he succeeds in the process of creating Mitchell's imagetext, which is the perfect interplay of both terms that result in a new reinforced meaning. Even more so, by using these ways of representation, which are illustration, approximation and truthful representation, Christopher is able to guide the reader in the complex comprehension process. That is, his level of textual consciousness allows us to refute the idea of Christopher as a person who is incapable of communicating.

KEYWORDS: IMAGETEXT, ASPERGER'S SYNDROME, COMMUNICATION, GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION,
THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

'What is the use of a book', thought Alice, 'without pictures and conversation?'
-- Lewis Carroll

When writing a novel, a writer uses a spectrum of literary devices to enrich his narrative, to make reader's mind work by keeping it busy during the whole process of decoding what lies underneath the surface of the words. However, not every single novel is full of these conventional literary devices, but some present a new emerging style of writing. It is possible to speak about this mode of writing when the narrator introduces elements of interrelation of the image and the textual reference. And it does not mean that the narrator merely replaces difficult passages with

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straightforward drawings. On the contrary, it means that the narrator plays a key role in an elaborate process when creating a text where each element is represented in such a way as to guide the reader in a labyrinthine process of novel comprehension. That is the case of Christopher Bloom, the narrator in the Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. He, who has been claimed by many incapable of communicating properly, by mixing words and images skillfully achieves to transfer reality on paper.

It is important to highlight that this emerging style does not have a relation to graphic novels, but to novels that are not supposed to have a presence of images in its structure. As it usually happens with anything that has recently emerged, the importance of graphic elements in a conventional novel has been underestimated or simply misunderstood. Jonathan Safran Foer, an American writer, whose novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is full of images and pictures, complains that “the use of images in novels is still considered to be a gimmick or some expression of the failure of language.” (qtd. in Sadokierski, “Gimmickry and Publishing”).

This is what happened with the analysis of Mark Haddon's detective novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Since the acclaimed novel was released, critics representing widely known magazines and newspapers have written numerous reviews of the book. Curiously, when checking them one by one, it becomes noticeable that the focus of these reviews is put on how authentically the main character has been depicted. This makes reference to Christopher's condition, Asperger's syndrome. Less attention receives an analysis of the narrative technique in terms of using graphical and mathematical approach when describing any element that the boy is surrounded by. Even less emphasis is put on the graphic representation itself. There is no presence of scrupulous analysis of the images that appear almost on every page, but a simple reference to it as the technique that is being used by readers to decipher the boy's complex way of thinking. As John Mullan muses on the subject in the review for guardian.co.uk, “sometimes he provides diagrams, as if these fulfilled the purposes of narrative in a more satisfactory way.” Some authors recognize that diagrams, maps and drawings are not simple gimmicks, but the representation of the visual component of the brain workings of an autistic child. Matthew Sussman, the reviewer from the Harvard Book Reviews explains, “[t]he diagrams and maps that punctuate the text are not the postmodern gimmicks they seem, but rather additional aids to help us see the world through Christopher's eyes.” It seems that they recognize Christopher's high intelligence, but still they claim that the failure of language is present.

Many authors claim that Christopher is not only unable to depict relations, emotions and actions, but due to his disease, he is unable to communicate properly and verbalize his thoughts or describe the images he has in mind. According to the general opinion, this is the reason why he uses graphic representation of whatever he has in his mind. Maja Barlo from Simon Fraser University concludes, “[t]he need for Christopher to supplement his language with diagrams and images wordlessly describes the trouble he has communicating using normal language” (4).

Thus, although reviewers simplify the theme putting an emphasis on the fact that Christopher has a “disability,” rather than ability to communicate, reinforcing the idea of the image

replacing actual words to simplify the process of narrating, it is possible to strongly disagree by claiming that Christopher uses graphic elements in a complex net where the image and the textual reference are interrelated in a unique communication process. Zoë Sadokierski proposes in her blog entry “What Am I Doing (Again)” which is the part of her PhD research on the usage of typo/graphic elements in fictional novels, “these visual elements are not being used *interchangeably with* written language; they are being used because, in combination with the written text, they express something that words alone cannot.”

It is of much relevance to refer to the theoretical points of view regarding the concept of graphic elements, image, text and other notions for further analysis of Christopher’s ability to masterly use them reaching the goal of reliable communication. Even more so, this study can help to refute the idea that Christopher recourses to this technique due to the simple reason that he is unable to use words properly.

First of all, it is important to refer to the notion of typo/graphic elements that are non-verbal elements present in the novel. An image belongs to this category. The text, in turn, is not understood here as the whole novel, but as mere textual references represented by conventional language. W.J.T. Mitchell, a scholar and theorist on visual arts from the University of Chicago, in his book *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* provides a scrupulous analysis of the subject introducing an additional taxonomy related to the interplay the image and text have. The following definitions of the aforementioned elements appear on the pages of the book: “the typographic conventions of the slash to designate “image/text” as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term “imagetext” designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. “Image-text,” with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal” (89). Thus, Mitchell considers the use of image/text as a failure of language, where there is a gap between the employed elements. However, the use of imagetext is the perfect combination of both creating a new reinforced meaning. The latter is used in Christopher Bloom’s narrative mode. James Bucky Carter in his essay “Imagetext in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time” agrees on this point by saying, “on the one hand we accept our narrator as someone with certain limits on his ability to express himself, but, especially in regards to Mitchell’s ideas on imagetext, we see that there is a strong possibility that these instances aren’t limiting at all.” Most certainly, Christopher is aware of the appropriate usage of one or another introduced image which is followed by the proper textual reference. And, even though there are situations when he is unable to achieve imagetext, that is to say the perfect combination of the image and the text, he recognizes it by explaining that the image provided is just an approximation.

Before the types of graphic elements are covered, it is important to mention that most of the authors of essays on the novel agree on the point that Christopher uses typo/graphic elements each time the description of stable, unchangeable and static objects or phenomena is needed. As Stephan Freibmann in his essay “A Tale of Autistic Experience: Knowing, Living, Telling in Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” concludes, “the mathematical-graphic approach is used to deal with general phenomena that remain stable over time and concern inanimate matter which, obviously, does not possess intentions” (9).

So, there are three ways in which Christopher employs the use of images when narrating his story which are illustration, truthful representation and approximation. The selection of one or another mode of narrating depends on whether Christopher is sure of what he is talking about or not, since the most relevant moral for Christopher is the presence of the truth in everything that is done or said.

The type that most perfectly illustrates a high degree of awareness of the narrator when using graphic elements in the process of narrating is truthful representation of the objects. Christopher is searching for reality, the truth, the way the objects and phenomena are. In this case when he is sure about what he is representing, he introduces the image by the phrase “like this,” which leads the reader to think that he is using simile, that is to say, he is comparing the object he is drawing with the real one based on the principle of similarity or analogy. Some of the examples of this reliable representation via simile are the particular type of handwriting Christopher’s Mother used to have (Haddon 113), the very accurate map of the zoo (Haddon 87), and the map of the department in London (Haddon 192), among others. Christopher knows perfectly what similes are, and how different they are comparing their function to that of metaphors. The latter actually cause him many troubles when he is trying to comprehend what is implied. Metaphorical process is the act of transferring some qualities from the source domain to the target domain, leaving some characteristics of the source domain aside. For this reason a metaphor cannot be considered a reliable representation, which Christopher is so much concerned about. Christopher compares both, the simile and the metaphor, by using the examples of a man’s hairy nose with two mice. Emphasizing once again on the importance of not lying when telling something he explains, “if you make a picture in your head of a man with two very small mice hiding in his nostrils, you will know what the police inspector looked like. And a simile is not a lie, unless it is a bad simile” (Haddon 17). Mitchell’s notion of imagetext is achieved fully by Christopher when he employs this type of narration, since he is able to connect the textual reference and the image itself in a perfect way.

On the other hand, every time the narrator has a doubt whether the representation of the object is a realistic one or not, he calls the reader’s attention, pointing out that this is a hypothetical diagram being used. He calls this type of representation an illustration. Some examples of illustrations in the book are the following: the diagram of the galaxy (Haddon 10), the way you work out which are the prime numbers (Haddon 11), the diagram representing the variability of the quantity of the frogs in the pond (Haddon 101), a map of Swindon (Haddon 140), which he refers to as a “hypothetical diagram too.” Christopher is concerned with the fact that what he is representing by the diagrams and charts is only the way one imagines them to be or the way they are supposed to be, nevertheless they are “what’s called *hypothetical*, which means that the numbers aren’t real numbers, it is just an *illustration*” (Haddon 101). These examples give the clue to the reader for further noticing that Christopher is able to consciously connect the textual reference to the graphic elements. Every time he does it he is aware that the chart is not a perfect representation, but a hypothetical one. One of the most representative and curious examples of the last idea is the difference of the way he connects the textual reference and the image itself at the time of introducing two charts that represent variables in the quantity of the frogs. When the representation

is chaotic due to the numbers being in whatever sequence, the narrator points out the chart is hypothetical again, but when Christopher manages reliable information, that is to say, when the sequence becomes constant, he introduces the chart with the phrase “like this.” Once again, the narrator succeeds at connecting an image and the text, failing to achieve the most reliable representation of the phenomena or objects though.

The third type of representation is called an approximation. Christopher is able to recognize at this level that he is helpless to concentrate when trying to decipher and to represent any phenomenon, thus the representation is not even an illustration, but an approximation. There are two situations when the narrator describes his mode of narrating as approximation. The first one occurs when he is trying to make a map of a train station, actually “not a very accurate map of the station because [he] was scared, so [he] was not noticing very well, and this is just what [he] remember[s], so it is an *approximation*” (Haddon 145). Although he accomplishes the goal to explain whether the image is a truthful one, a gap is produced in the narration, since the diagram of the map is introduced by the phrase “like this.” Thus, the term image/text introduced by Mitchell takes place in this particular situation. The second event is related to the time Christopher wants to share his timetable. Since the schedule is not as accurate as it should be, the narrator introduces it by saying “this was the timetable for a Monday and also it is an *approximation*” (Haddon 155). This time he does not fail at the moment of presenting the chart, that is to say at the moment of relating the image and the textual reference.

The only instance when the narrator actually fails to explain what he is representing, because he was not able to do it due to total misunderstanding, is an attempt to recognize different kinds of emotions. He actually depicts some faces in a sequence, (2-3) but still he cannot reasonably explain what they are and what they are representing. It is important to mention, however, that in this case Christopher is attempting to apply graphical approach to animate subjects and actions that are not stable, but change all the time. That is why this failure is not considered as a crucial point to have in mind when doing the scrupulous analysis of the images that the book is full of. Nevertheless, James Bucky Carter notices, “[t]hrough we see a disability here from Christopher, we must also note his ability to recognize his own delicacies in his relationship to image/textuality. Even here in a moment of “disability,” he is not without a reading/comprehension strategy: “if I don’t know what someone is saying, I ask them what they mean or I walk away”. Christopher does not fail completely, but recognizes his “disability”, which conversely points out to the existence of his ability to act according to “a reading/comprehension strategy”.

Taking everything into consideration, it is possible to conclude that Christopher does not fail to communicate, since, despite the fact that he uses language in simplistic terms, he does achieve to share his thoughts and to be understood. He accomplishes it not only by means of visual communication, which is “just as important as verbal communication, if not more important” (Lester 20), but by means of reaching a perfect interdependence of the image and the textual reference, thus creating imagetext. Besides, it is necessary to have in mind that language itself sometimes fails to communicate truthfully due to the overwhelming use of figurative language. Language is claimed to be metaphorical as well. And at the time of decoding diverse types of

messages, a very complex metacognitive process takes place. Christopher does not like metaphors, considering an imagetext way of representation the most exact and reliable one. As James Bucky Carter claims, “with this level of textual awareness embedded throughout the novel, it seems a fallacy to focus on how Christopher *can't* adequately read or write for the reader or even how his autism provides challenges that might distance him from his readers.”

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